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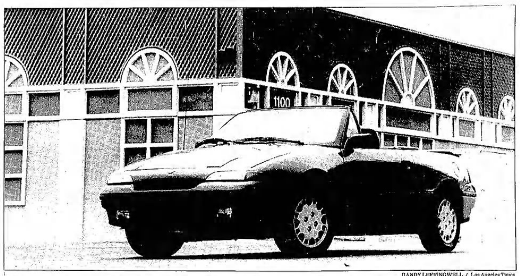
CAPRI: It's a New Wizard From Aus



RANDY LEFFINGWELL / Los Angeles Times

Mid-development changes delayed the Australian-built Mercury Capri's arrival here. But with a base price of $12,588, it was worth the wait.

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Frankfurt Motor Show.

Miata is saucy motoring that will leave bug splotches on your contact lenses. Its tuned exhaust is better listening than KKGO. Miata's entire appeal is its return to classical form and elementary functions.

The Capri is quieter and softer, almost a touring car. It is much more a riding roadster than a driving car. It is pleasant and satisfying without ever really delivering exhilaration.

Yet as the Triumph TR-6, the AC-Ace and BMW 507s demonstrated in their primes, nowhere is it ordained (except by purists in string-backed driving gloves) that the high of alfresco motoring may only be delivered through noise, dash, zinging emotions and wind-tingled ears.

The Capri certainly delivers satisfaction. It just doesn't make a huge fuss about it. In short, noted a Mercury spokesman, the Capri is "not a toy . . . and it does have room for extra people and golf clubs.

"This [the Capri] can be your only car. You'd be hard pressed to own a Miata as your first and only car."

Unfortunately, the delivery dalliance of Capri shows in the lines of the car.

Because it was first sketched in 1983, the shape remains the gentle wedge that was the state of the styling arts in the early '80s.

Remember the slope-fronted TR-7 and TR-8? Recall the Nissan Pulsar NX coupe with the blunt butt that became such a pretty rag top when cut into a convertible by Southern California's after-market converters?

So despite the Capri's rear deck spoiler, its integral aerodynamic skirting, distinctive belt line and other cues of the '90s, enough whispers from the '80s remain.

The Capri is not a gorgeous car. It certainly is not an unattractive vehicle. It is quite simply and rather pleasantly there.

The car comes in only two versions.

$12,588 buys the basic 2+2 (with jump seats better utilized by groceries and tennis racquets before people) offering a multivalve, inline-four engine good for 100 horsepower.

$15,522 is the price on the turbocharged Capri XR2 with 30% more horsepower and a full inventory of options including air conditioning, cruise control, fog lamps, power windows and snazzier aluminum wheels.

Both are convertibles, and there's an optional hardtop available for $1,200. All come with four-wheel disc brakes, power windows and locks, and driver-side air bag. A four-speed automatic is available for the entry-level Capri, but not the XR2.

Dropping and raising the soft top is easier than opening a checkbook. It's a three-catch operation—albeit one that can only be performed from outside the car—with the canvas folding back and down into a storage area behind the seats.

A solid plastic cover clicks down over the stored top and the entire maneuver takes all of 37 seconds.

The rear window, however, is flexible plastic.

So only a year or three in California's smaze-focused sunshine will determine whether it browns out and atrophies before the top pops its stitching.

The interior of the car is flawless—with the exception of elongated doors. They're actually six inches longer than the barn doors found on an LTD Crown Victoria station wagon. That makes for an uncomfortable, over-the-shoulder, nerve-pinching reach to find the locking button and seat belt harness.

But the leather-covered, four-spoke steering wheel is of Grand Prix heft and cushioning. And Mercury has managed to fit an air bag alongside the electronics for the horn and cruise control without having the center of the steering wheel bulge bigger than a deep-dish apple pie.

Size and positioning of the instruments allows instinctive scanning. The lines of the dash are crisp and coordinated with highly legible lettering and symbology. But we would have liked some small container in the console with a lid for gas receipts, parking stubs and other mini-documents that have a habit of fluttering free whenever a convertible top is down.

The Capri's bucket seats are secure without being Spartan, and the fabric upholstery (leather is not available) has a high, tweedy quality. Power-window and mirror controls, however, have a slight touch of Aussie nonsense to them: They are mounted in door and center-console arm rests where they can quite easily be operated by the driver's elbows.

Trunk space is 9 cubic feet, which averages out to adequate. Wind hisses with the convertible top up are quite noticeable, and noisy enough to suspect a missed catch or a window left ajar.

Mercury introduced its Capri to the motoring media at Chandler, Ariz., which is 20 miles south of Phoenix as the heat shimmers. It also is the new location of Bob Bondurant's School of High Performance Driving that recently traded cool pines for hot saguaros in moving from Napa and the Sears Point Raceway.

Although the Capri wasn't really geared for sterling Bob's 1.6-mile serpentine, there was sufficient room and an obvious freedom from gendarmes to play very hard indeed with this little wizard of Aus.

And the fact that it survived two days of being thrashed sideways, spun, locked up and over-revved in desert temperatures until clutches and brakes smelled like smoldering sneakers is tribute enough to Capri's over-engineering.

In initial acceleration, the car is well up to what can be expected from multivalve, turbocharged engines in this horsepower and price range. That translates to 0-60 acceleration times a full second quicker than Miata and only a second slower than turbocharged sport coupes from Mitsubishi and Ford.

A top speed of 125 is quite respectable—but it is in its mid-range performance, playing around with fourth and fifth gears at speeds above 70, where the Capri simply surges and shines.

The car is wonderfully well-mannered and forgiving even when maneuvering spiritedly at these speeds. Credit that to a beefed-up body that reduces convertible flex to a minimum and a suspension setup that keeps the car predictable and flat without making every road ripple, to the discomfort of denture wearers.

Steering is loyal except when powering hard from slow, tight turns. The Capri is a front-wheel driver, and that means torque steer—or front-wheel slap and jiggles under certain configurations accompanied by serious power.

It is not an enormous flaw.

But it is a handling surprise that engineers in their white coats and frowns, whether building Capris or Corrados, should have tamed by now.

Capri was tailored to a definite profile, one of fun, youth, economy, performance and a sense of the pure sports car but with somewhat broader purpose.

Australia has delivered precisely that. Call it Mercury Dundee.

1991 MERCURY CAPRI XR2

COST:
- Base.................................... $12,588.
- As tested. $15,977 (XR2 with air conditioning, aluminum wheels and power locks, cruise control, fog lamps and turbocharged engine.)

ENGINE:
- Inline 4 cylinders, 16 valves and turbocharged developing 132 horsepower.

TYPE:
- Front-wheel drive, 2+2 convertible sports car.

PERFORMANCE:
- 0-60 (as tested) 8 seconds.
- Top speed (as track tested) 126 m.p.h.
- Fuel economy, EPA city-highway, 23 to 28 m.p.g.

CURB WEIGHT:
- 2,520 pounds.

THE GOOD:
- Racy handling, much pep for the price.
- A kinder, gentler sports car with high fun factor.
- Driver-side air bag as standard equipment.
- Raising and lowering of top is quick, painless and requires no bad language skills.

THE BAD:
- Stale styling.
- Slipstream noises with top up.
- Inconvenient positioning of door buttons, power mirror and window controls.

THE UGLY:
- A perennial peeve: pop-up headlights.

HEAT

Continued from E1
inches long, six inches wide and half an inch thick—under my hat. It's really comfortable if it's really hot."

—Dr. Roy Walford, UCLA pathology professor and experimental gerontologist, who has raised the world's oldest mice and spent five days in Biosphere, a sealed, artificial environment in Oracle, Ariz.

"I roll up my sleeves, drink a lot of iced espresso and complain a lot."

—Nancy Silverton, pastry chef and owner of Campanile restaurant

"I take baths with ice cubes in them. El Vez puts his underwear, his Aqua Velva and his Tabasco sauce in the freezer."

—Robert Lopez, a.k.a. El Vez, the Mexican Elvis

"I go to the back of the temple. It's cooler there. I just don't move when I feel a sweat coming on. I sit down."

—The Rev. Masao Kodani, a Buddhist priest at Los Angeles' Senshin Temple who wears four layers of ceremonial robes several times a week during services

"I go to the beach in the morning and surf. Then I come home and skate until it's dark."

—Tony Hawk, the world's No. 1 skateboarder

"Most of my life I've cooled off by bathing. You can make your bath almost ceremonious. Right now, I frequently bathe in a mixture of Epsom salts, aloe vera gel, Kneipp bath oils, which contain essential oils, aloe vera bubble bath and a little high-grade olive oil—extra virgin, cold-pressed. Everyone should develop their own recipe. The combination of Epsom salts and aloe vera gives a comforting sense of being in an amniotic fluid."

—Marilyn Ferguson, author of "The Aquarian Conspiracy" and editor-publisher of Brain/Mind Bulletin

"Our lunch business goes from 11:30 to 2:30. So at 2:30, we say 'pool time.' The waitresses and I jump off the roof and into the swimming pool that's in the middle of the restaurant. I tell the girls clothes are optional."

—Steve Obradovich, owner of Julie's restaurant in Los Angeles and semi-retired beach volleyball superstar who appeared in the film "Side Out"

"In the old days, we were always wet because we were busy with clay. It was very moist and caky. My skin was beautiful. A lot of people pay big money to get that way. These days we stay hot [working with metal and wood]. I stay in my basement, which isn't very picturesque, but it's cooler."

—Peter Shire, sculptor and furniture designer

"I stay cool, turn on the fan, wear as little clothing as possible and work. When I'm working, I don't think of anything else."

—Poet-novelist Hubert Selby, author of "Last Exit to Brooklyn"

"The truth is that, because I'm designing next year's swimwear line, I don't get to the beach. I stay in an air-conditioned office."

—Robin Piccone, designer-owner of Body Glove, the swimwear firm known for launching neoprene bathing suits

"I don't [beat the heat]. For 10 years, I've been going to Palm Springs in the summertime, and the temperature there is usually 108 to 116; 112 is not uncommon. I enjoy it. All of a sudden, it gets just nice here and everybody's complaining. I don't know what to do about it."

—Dr. George Fishbeck, weatherman, KABC-TV

"Maybe my ideas are too naive or simplistic, but I'd recommend staying in the house, and if staying inside doesn't work, you can always put ice in your pants."

—Marsha Warfield, actress-comedian-talk show host who appears on "Night Court" and "The Marsha Warfield Show"

"I just constantly change T-shirts. I let them soak up sweat and move on to the next one until they run out. I haven't run out yet."

—Richard Meltzer, author of "L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas"

"I do a lot of drawings and sketches. It's critical that your hands not sweat on the art work, so I open the windows in the morning, when the air is cooler. The house stays cool until 1 or so, then I turn on the air."

—Syd Mead, conceptual designer known for his work on theme parks, consumer products and transportation environments, such as magnetic levitation trains

"I get a stack of detective novels, get a hammock, fix up a jug of lemonade and lay in the hammock and breeze through the detective novels."

—Shane Black, screenwriter best known for "Lethal Weapon" and the $1.75 million he recently earned for his script "The Last Boy Scout"

COOL: A Few Words on Ways to Beat the Heat

Continued from E1
—Arthur (Klondike) Jones, crafts and services worker on "The Arsenio Hall Show" who is often enlisted to perform his unusual style of dance to "Love Train"

"Basically, what I do is kick back. I get a bag of ice. We make these frosty drinks with gin and Super Socko, turn on the a.c. and just chill."

—Kid Frost, East L.A. rap artist also known as "the chosen one, the frozen one"

"I'm very close with my friends who have pools right now."

—Carrie Snow, actress and comedian host of PBS' "Comedy Tonight"

"I put my wife, Darlene, in the refrigerator and she rolls all over me."

—Ice-T, Los Angeles rap star

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